

Dear Neighbor;

There has been a lot said in the press recently about the dissolution of the Rocky Hill Board of Education. While I have jointly authored statements with Mayor Heck of Millstone and School Board President Lacava, I thought it would be appropriate to speak directly to the residents of Rocky Hill and clarify the situation as best I can.

After months of requesting information about a potential merger with the Montgomery School District from the County Executive Superintendent (CES) Trudy Doyle and being told we could not have it, our School Board Secretary was informed by her on Thursday June 26th, that if Assembly Bill A4141 passed the Legislature, the Rocky Hill School District would be disbanded on Tuesday June 30th and all of the elected officials and employees would be dismissed. The Legislature passed A4141 about 1 a.m. on Friday June 27th. The Governor, in a campaign style event in Haddonfield, signed the bill on Tuesday June 30th at 3:30 p.m. Approximately 24 hours later, the School Board received a letter from the Commissioner of Education stating that the Rocky Hill School District no longer existed and that all control and authority had been transferred to the Montgomery Township School District.

So what does this mean?

First and most importantly, be assured that the recent actions by the Governor and the CES will in no way affect the quality of the education that our children are receiving. The Montgomery School District is one of the best in the state and I personally feel very fortunate that my children have come up through that system. While I may differ with the Montgomery School Board on spending habits, I do believe that the Board is made up of some very talented individuals who really do care about the best interest of our children. If we must face a merger, we are fortunate that it is with the Montgomery School District.

At the current time it is still very hard to say if this merger will be financially beneficial for either district because there is very little information available about the tax implications. What we do know is that the CES has projected a total cost savings between the two districts of about 34 thousand dollars a year on a combined budget of approximately 79 million dollars, a savings of less than .04 percent. However, we have been instructed not to lower your school tax to reflect any estimated savings at this time.

So, if taxes will stay relatively the same for the short term, and the education of our children will remain the same, you have to ask yourself, "what's all the fuss about?"

It is my firm belief, and also that of a growing number of Mayors, that your civil rights have been badly trampled upon. First, this decision was made with no input from you, the voters. There were no public meetings to answer your questions, there was no referendum for you to

vote on, as there have been and will be in other towns. The decision about the education of your children and the tax implications of that education has been taken away from you. It may not be a bad decision but it is clearly your right to make that decision. Even if the legislation did not allow time for a voter referendum, then at least, the publically elected school boards should have been enabled to negotiate the financial consequences of any merger – not have the terms dictated by a political appointee.

The other pressing issue is that there is no representation on the Montgomery School Board. The law states that the CES, not the voters of Rocky Hill, will appoint a Rocky Hill member to the Montgomery School Board until April of next year, at which point the seat goes away and the Board reverts back to 9 at-large seats – elected across the new combined district. The attorney representing the School Boards of Rocky Hill and Millstone has determined that there is clear case law showing that this is a form of taxation without representation. He has filed court papers to postpone the dissolution of the School Boards until such time as that issue can be litigated. I will keep you posted on how that turns out.

So here is the bottom line. The merger of the school districts may or may not be a good thing. We just don't know because of the way the information has been withheld. What is important is that we do not allow this type of rights infringement to go unanswered.

Two years ago small towns were singled out for 100% aid cuts for no other reason than their size. We fought the unfairness of that and gained back 75% of the aid. Last year, without agreement or notice, we received a bill for the use of the State Police just because of our size. We fought that and had the budget language declared unconstitutional. Now, while larger districts will be able to put any merger to a referendum, we are again being singled out for no other reason than our size. Being essentially told that your vote does not matter on the education of your children and the tax rates to pay for it seems kind of hypocritical in an election year doesn't it?

Please join me in this endeavor to protect your rights. Call or write the Governor, the Commissioner of Education and the CES and let them know how you feel about this.

Thanks for you help.

Respectfully,

Ed